

Primary Engagements

by David G. Berube

Maybe it's the approaching millennial moment. It could be El Nino. Perhaps it's just that my physician accused me of being middle-aged. In any event, I find myself wondering a lot about where life in general, and church life in particular, is headed. I wonder how we're doing what we're doing, and whether or not that will enable us to keep doing what we're supposed to do in the future.

In 1997, the Alban Institute studied cultural trends in the U.S. and how they effect the church. Here is some of what they found:

- People still look to religion for meaning and values, but there is not one agreed upon set of values, or one widely accepted moral authority.
- Mainline churches are still aging and losing members.
- People come to church seeking "community," but can't define what that is.
- People under the age of about 40 are, on the whole, disconnected from mainline churches. Those who do join have different expectations than older members.
- Conflict is increasing between clergy and lay people.
- Finances continue to cause pressure in many congregations.
- Transience and mobility of members impacts church life more than anything.
- Loyalty, to local churches and denominations, is down, interest grouping of diverse people of faith is up, the role of clergy continues to change, and we all seem to be searching for what it means to be faithful in this new context.

How are we responding to that reality? I see many churches doing business as usual — the same programs, in the same way, with the same structure as "we've always done." And who can blame us? We're doing what we know and have been taught. The problem is, those traditional models are working less and less well, and new models are yet to emerge. I know there are exceptions. I'm speaking of the majority of churches I see.

In relation to the changing reality, the church is more and more marginalized, and losing sight of why we're here. Reality has shifted, yet the methods, structures and plans we typically use tend to reflect either the outdated and ineffective, or the radically market-driven. We choose either to drive an antique horse and buggy down the superhighway, or jump into a race car without any experience, wearing a blindfold, and step on the gas. Or we try to blend the two. How can we continue to faithfully minister in the future if that's all we've got?

I believe we need a way to constantly remind ourselves of what's foundational, so we can address these important questions: Why are we here, and, what are we to do?

Four primary engagements of the Christian life, I believe, need continual attention if we are going to minister faithfully in a world of constant and rapid change. Attention given to these areas will make it possible for us to answer the critical questions of our existence. Whatever else we do, it is vital we monitor and tend to these engagements, because they form a necessary foundation under all we do.

The primary engagements of the Christian life, as I see them, are — Engaging God, Engaging God's Word, Engaging Other Christians, and Engaging the World.

We engage God when we worship and pray. We develop a relationship with God as we explore all the marvelous wonder wrapped up in who God is. We need a relationship with God for our faith to have a point. This primary engagement reminds us that church is more than a social club, social service center, or small business. It reminds us "Christian" is more than a label. Engaging God reminds us the church is the People of God.

We engage God's Word (the text, and Jesus as Word of God) when we study the Bible. We learn in this relationship what it means to be a person connected to the Lord. We need to reflect upon scripture so we have a map and compass for living our faith. This primary engagement provides us boundaries within which to live and minister. Engaging God's Word reminds us we are maturing disciples, and points us down the road toward greater maturity.

We engage other Christians when we share in fellowship. In this relationship, we are able to develop intimacy with other believers. Christian fellowship allows us to develop support, accountability, friendship and a safe place to work out our faith. It also reminds us the journey is one of joy and re-creation, as well as planning and labor.

We engage the world when we share in mission and service. In this relationship we practice our calling. Engaging the world reminds us Jesus sends us into the world to do his work. We need service and mission to fulfill our calling as the hands and feet of Jesus; to demonstrate the second part of the Great Commandment — "...love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31).

I believe a well-balanced Christian life happens when we are intentional about engaging these four key areas of our faith. The relationship of the primary engagements is held in balance, and their focus remains clear, as they center on Jesus Christ.

I hesitate to call this a new model for the church, however, I can see it working as an organizing tool for individuals and congregations.

For individuals, this tool can be part of daily devotional time. We can ask at the end of the day, "How did I engage God, God's Word, other Christians, and the world today?" We can use it to evaluate our schedules and divide our precious time, allowing space to deal with these critical parts of our life. In just a few minutes, we can get a pulse of our spiritual life, so we know if we are in balance.

In congregations, we can ask, "As the Body of Christ in this place, how are we engaging God, God's Word, other Christians, the world?" "How are we helping each other keep track of these primary engagements in our individual lives?" "How are we hindering each other?" Planning can be done with an eye toward seeing all we do maintains spiritual balance. That will help us maintain spiritual health, enabling us to represent our Lord more faithfully.

I can even see ministry groups using the primary engagements as an agenda organizing tool. Each meeting could include time for each of these engagements, with particular ministry reports and planning fitting under the appropriate engagement. For example, the Trustees work on refurbishing the building entrance fits in as Engaging the World; the Hospitality Committee monthly fellowship suppers fit as Engaging Other Christians. This tool could help focus our meetings as spiritual encounters, rather than "just business."

I can hear a voice saying, "That's too simple, maybe even too idealistic to work." Maybe it is. I admit this is not yet field tested in the real world of the local church. However, I've a hunch something like this might help us as we search for how we'll serve the Lord now, and into the future.

After almost 2000 years complicating the church, I just wonder if uncomplicating it might help us reconnect with the love, joy and infectious movement of the spirit that draws others. If we seek first the kingdom of God, taking care of these primary engagements, I believe God will help us faithfully address the needs of those within and without our sanctuary walls. Then we can wonder with excitement about what tremendous ministry moment is coming next.